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ABSTRACT

Certain types of evaluation tools used in continuing education offerings limit the evaluation process and hence the value of the offering. Asking a yes/no question as an exclusive evaluation method for learners' achievement of objectives is inappropriate for certain types of offerings. Provision should be made for assessment of continuing education in nursing through a variety of methods. The evaluation tools selected should reflect the purposes of the offering. One factor to be considered is whether a certain performance standard is expected at the conclusion of the course. The continuing education instructor must develop some criteria against which learners' performance can be measured. A paper-and-pencil test would be appropriate to evaluate cognitive knowledge; a return demonstration on a mannequin and supervised practice would be appropriate to evaluate psychomotor skills for an intravenous therapy course. Courses that would benefit from indepth evaluation are those that provide preparation for beginning practice in a specialty area or the performance of a specialized skill. Indepth evaluation would ensure that all persons receiving a certificate have achieved a minimum set of criteria and enable participants to identify areas of strength and areas requiring further study. The evaluation tool must be tailored to the type of program. Evaluations tailored to the specific objectives of the offering are valuable in assessing its overall effectiveness. (YLB)

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A Second Look at Evaluation for Adult Learners

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A Second Look at Evaluation for Adult Learners

Having just completed a second term as a member of PNA's Approver Unit, I can attest to the high quality of continuing education offerings and creativity of educators in Pennsylvania. However, I feel that I must speak out about certain types of evaluation tools used in continuing education offerings that limit the evaluation process and hence the value of the offering. The use of a tool that asks if the participant has met the objectives for the offering is insufficient for certain types of courses, yet still meets the criteria for PNA approval.

An evaluation tool that asks the participant whether each of the objectives has been met is certainly appropriate for adult learners. According to Knowles (1980, p. 56) education for adult learners focuses on self-diagnosis of their own needs, formulating objectives for learning, sharing responsibility for designing and carrying out learning activities and evaluating their progress on objectives. Therefore, adult learners should be able to assess the adequacy of a particular offering or program. Indeed, PNA (1989) criteria state that participants should be given the opportunity to evaluate their achievement of each objective. However, the use of such a tool alone can be limiting and is sort of like throwing out the baby with the bath water. Such a tool may not be very useful in helping adult learners to rediagnose their learning needs. This in turn diminishes the value of the offering to the learner.

Continuing education is undertaken for a number of reasons: self-improvement, to develop competency for additional job requirements, to achieve or maintain certification, or personal enrichment. Continuing education adds to nurses' knowledge, enabling them to expand and refine their practice. Likewise, evaluation with the purpose of evaluating the

achievement of learners can be accomplished by a number of methods and can be tailored to the type of course being offered.

Asking a yes/no question as an exclusive evaluation method for learners' achievement of objectives is inappropriate for certain types of offerings. For example, it would be hard to conceive of an arrhythmia detection course without assessing the participants' abilities to detect arrhythmias and identify the appropriate course of action. Presumably, the purpose of taking the course is to develop competence in detecting arrhythmias. The question arises as to who should be evaluating the achievement of the objectives: the learner or the provider of the offering.

As a consumer, I would want to know whether I could achieve a certain standard or level of competency, and actually had the knowledge and skill that I believed I gained. I would want the faculty to use a variety of methods to assist in the evaluation of a particular competency. As an employer who is sending a nurse to such a course, I would want to know that the staff member has beginning competency in detecting arrhythmias. If hospital policies are in place that permit the individuals completing the course to defibrillate, administer medication and institute other emergency treatments on the basis of their ability to detect arrhythmias, it would be incumbent on the institution to rely on courses that have outcome-oriented evaluation instruments.

As a faculty member, I would want to know if the participants had difficulty with a portion of my presentation and if some areas required improvement. As a program sponsor, I would want to know whether my programs were effective in changing participants' practice. An arrhythmia detection course that does not include a paper and pencil test with analyses of arrhythmias does a disservice to the participants.

I suppose that one could argue if the objectives of a course do not call for the achievement of certain behaviors and if the use of a yes/no questionnaire is in keeping with the objectives, it is therefore a legitimate practice in accordance with principles of adult education. I would counter that argument by stating that in order to have a valuable course, the educator must identify meaningful objectives and prepare the content, teaching methodologies and evaluations accordingly.

The evaluation tools selected should reflect the purposes of the offering. It is not necessary to have a test of cognitive knowledge or performance test for each offering. One factor to be considered is whether a certain performance standard is expected at the conclusion of the course. According to Puetz (1987, p. 118), the continuing education instructor must develop some criteria against which learners' performance can be measured. For example, it would be most appropriate to include a paper and pencil test to evaluate cognitive knowledge; and a return demonstration on a mannikin and supervised practice to evaluate psychomotor skills for an intravenous therapy course. Other types of courses that would benefit from in-depth evaluation would be courses that provide preparation for beginning practice in a specialty area: i.e. critical care, neonatal intensive care, renal dialysis; or the performance of a specialized skill: i.e. using intravenous access devices, physical assessment, chemotherapy administration. In-depth evaluation would insure that all persons receiving a certificate have achieved a minimum set of criteria. It would also enable participants to identify areas of strength and areas requiring further study.

Initially, preparation of tests of cognitive knowledge and competency testing will require more time, but the rewards are well worth the effort. Providing a particular offering several times during the year will help to

offset the time and energy involved in the development of evaluation tools. If the course is being marketed to nurses outside the community, the effort involved in incorporating appropriate testing procedures will contribute positively to the sponsor's reputation and attract participants to the offering as well as future offerings. The reputation of faculty and program sponsors in the nursing community spreads very quickly. Potential participants carefully scrutinize continuing education offerings to obtain the best value for their time, effort and money.

It is important to tailor the evaluation tool to the type of program. One certainly does not need a paper and pencil test of cognitive knowledge for every continuing education offering. If the program or offering is largely concerned with attitudinal changes, it may very well be sufficient for the learner to assess their achievement of the objectives. A certification preparation course probably does not need detailed evaluation since the participants are likely to be familiar with the content and passing the certification examination can be used as an outcome criterion.

It has become become commonplace to simply ask the participants to indicate their achievement of the objectives with a yes or no response choice on the evaluation tool. While this does meet PNA criteria, I feel that it limits the amount of useful information available to the sponsor or the faculty.

Unless the educator digresses widely from the announced topic or gives a terrible presentation, I would assume that the vast majority of learners would indicate that the objectives were met. Therefore, instead of some meaningful information, one is left with a rubber stamp that the program was effective. It certainly is fast and easy to compile the results of this type of questionnaire and give oneself a pat on the back for a job well done.

A yes or no response choice provides little information about what was effective and what was not and therefore its use needs to be judicious. Few educators are uniformly excellent or uniformly terrible. A far more useful response choice to evaluate the achievement of the objectives would be a 5-point Likert scale which allows for a range of responses rather than just the two response choices available with the yes/no format. This would enable the faculty to find out which components of the presentation were more effective than others. Faculty and sponsors could then refine the offering and make improvements in either the content or teaching strategies.

Evaluations that are tailored to the specific objectives of the offering are valuable in assessing its overall effectiveness. Evaluation methodologies can be selected that are in keeping with principles of adult learning and provide substantive information to the participants and the sponsors alike. Paper and pencil tests, performance tests and careful selection of response choices are three evaluation methods that need not be discarded in the name of adherence to principles of adult learning. Used wisely, with interaction between participants and faculty, these methods still have a role in enhancing the evaluation process in continuing education for adult learners.

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